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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE USD FAS WASHINGTON DC
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRN/USMISSION UN ROME PRIORITY 0004
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2251

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000025

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPT PLS PASS CDC -- NCOX, SBLOUNT AND TO HHS - STEIGER, HICKEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [CASC](#) [SENV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL OFFICIAL CLAIMS AVIAN FLU UNDER CONTROL AS
DISEASE SPREADS

REF: A) KOLKATA 14 B) KOLKATA 17 C) KOLKATA 19 D) KOLKATA 23

KOLKATA 00000025 001.2 OF 002

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 22, ConGen, Pol/Econoff and Econ FSN met West Bengal State Animal Resource Department (ARD) Principal Secretary Dilip Chakraborty to discuss GOWB efforts to control the spreading Avian Influenza (AI) in the state, which has gone from two districts to seven districts in the past week. Chakraborty did not fully acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, claiming the GOWB was managing the outbreak, and blaming neighboring Bangladesh's inadequate response to AI for the current problem. Chakraborty said that culling and clean-up operations were gaining momentum and that the GOWB hoped to cull two million birds in the next six days. He indicated that the GOWB was facing difficulty in procuring personal protective equipment (PPE). ConGen expressed concern about the AI situation and extended U.S. cooperation and assistance should the local government request it through the GOI. Contrary to Chakraborty's protestations of "everything is under control," the GOWB response to the AI outbreak so far has been slow and inadequate and the AI infections will likely continue to spread.
END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) During a January 22 meeting with Consulate officers, W. Bengal government ARD Principal Secretary Dilip Chakraborty noted that AI has been confirmed in seven state districts, up from just two districts in the past week. He said that with the expanded area that the ARD plans to cull two million chickens and other birds in the seven districts in six days. With the arrival of veterinary and ARD personnel from other states, including Assam, Harayana, and Rajasthan, the number of culling teams will number approximately 500. (Comment: Considering that 300 culling teams were only able to kill 160,000 birds in the past five days, the two million culling target is optimistic. End Comment.)

3. (SBU) Chakraborty blamed neighboring Bangladesh for the avian influenza outbreak. Despite the presence of Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladeshi Rifles (BDR) soldiers, he pointed out the free movement of goods and people across the international borders, and commented that India will continue to be threatened with AI as long as Bangladesh did not take adequate measures to control the disease. He indicated that W. Bengal and the GOI have now sealed international and inter-district borders to stop the movement of poultry in W.

Bengal.

¶4. (U) Chakraborty admitted initial problems with the culling operations, but attributed the difficulties to two causes, which he felt had now been addressed. Initially, villagers did not give the poultry for culling as they were not confident about receiving subsequent compensation. Chakraborty said the GOWB has now adopted a policy of immediate payment when farmers bring in birds for culling. Moreover, on January 19 and 20, Chakraborty said that Muslims villagers did not participate in culling operations due to the Muharram festival. Chakraborty claimed that the culling has increased following Muharram and with cash compensation, more villagers are now complying with the cull.

¶5. (SBU) ConGen expressed USG concerns about the spread of AI in ¶W. Bengal and inquired whether the USG could provide assistance. Chakraborty said that the AI outbreak was under control, but that ARD's stock of personal protective equipment (PPE) was running low. The GOWB has ordered 20,000 more kits but the supplies are slow in coming. Chakraborty said that the GOWB would continue to work with the GOI for more PPE kits. Chakraborty believed that the shortage of PPE was a result of the Chinese government placing an order for one million PPE kits with the primary supplier in the United States.

¶6. (U) Chakraborty also criticized the media for sensationalizing the AI outbreak. He complained that AI reports, especially those about non-confirmed human infections, were inaccurate. He said that in many cases pictures printed in newspapers showing children playing with infected and dead birds were staged by reporters.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Chakraborty's theme of "everything is under control" suggests that the GOWB is still not acknowledging the seriousness of the state's AI outbreak. Econ FSN found in his visit to the affected areas that the few initial culling teams were already suffering severe stress from a task that is both

KOLKATA 00000025 002.2 OF 002

mentally and physically taxing. The rapid spread, from two to seven districts in one week, is alarming and indicates that the GOWB response has been too slow. The GOWB is unlikely to meet its target of two million birds culled in the next week. The media reports may have some inaccurate information but the media has been better at conveying the reality of the AI outbreak than the GOWB and the regular headlines have at least forced some accountability. The state government has done a poor job of explaining the risks of AI to the affected villagers prompting many to not cooperate with the culling or the safety measures. The GOWB is unwilling to directly ask for any form of international assistance as the Indian bureaucracy requires such requests to go through the national government. Failing an effective state-level response, limited GOI involvement and the general unwillingness to accept foreign assistance, the AI outbreak in West Bengal will likely continue to spread.
JARDINE